



# TOO MANY ESSAYS!

Angela Weiss, a senior at Brookfield Academy (MA), had the importance of her college application essays drilled into her for years.

From the college fairs she attended to campus visits to advice from her counselor, she knew schools “put a lot of emphasis on these supplemental essays.”

She applied to eight schools which required 14 essays.

“I put a lot of work into them,” Weiss said. “It took a lot of my time, especially first semester senior year. It was extremely stressful to balance applying for college and still balancing schoolwork.”

Her classmate Anna Jace, who applied to nine colleges, agreed.

“It’s a very daunting process in the beginning,” she said. “Having 14 essays to write and having none of them done in the beginning is pretty hard.”

According to the Higher Education Research Institute, 35 percent of first-time freshmen applied to seven or more colleges during the Fall 2016 admission cycle. More than 80 percent of first-time freshmen apply to at least three colleges each year.

But more applications mean more essays for students. And more colleges seem to be requiring unique essays to try and get to know the students better.

Katherine Pastor, a school counselor at Flagstaff High School (AZ) and a former National School Counselor of the Year, has seen this trend with her students. She said it is not uncommon for her students to have to write 10 or more essays during the application process, and that doesn’t take into account the essays they need to write for scholarship applications.

As a result, student stress levels are “through the roof,” Pastor said. “Stressed out to the point where they become almost apathetic... There is so much to do, on top of being a high school student. Writing an essay, you can’t just wing that. You’ve got to spend some time on it.”

She often finds it hard to help her students because their timeline doesn’t match the adult support timeline. They have activities after school, meaning that most students won’t start working on college applications and the supplemental essays until 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. when counselors and many parents aren’t available.

Ethan Kass, a senior at Brookfield, applied to 12 schools and wrote 15 essays, all while balancing a part-time job and his schoolwork.

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By Ashley Dobson



"I spent the majority of my time brainstorming, thinking about what I could possibly say, what would interest someone, what would make someone notice me, what would set me apart," he said. "It's hard to say."

His classmate Abigail Schlosser found "it was a lot more work than I was expecting."

Schlosser is the oldest of her siblings and cousins, so everything about the college application process was new to her. She applied to seven schools and wrote 12 essays.

"Especially in the fall of senior year, everyone is busy with sports and college application stuff. After writing my Common App essay, the supplemental essays did add a lot of additional work. I'm taking four AP classes," she said. "The uncertainty just adds a lot of stress to your workload."

Stu Schmill, dean of admissions and student financial services at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has an interesting perspective on the process. This year, he is both a dean and a dad to a high school senior applying to college.

Watching his daughter go through the process taught him a lot about the student experience.

"I think oftentimes students wonder what's the right answer or what's the best answer... I encouraged my daughter not to worry about that and to just try and communicate whatever she would like to communicate about herself. I think sometimes the disconnect comes in that students don't always know what admission committees are looking for, what information is most helpful," Schmill said. "...It's hard for students to know that much about

the process. There's a real information gap students have about the process. Every student goes through it the first time themselves."

This information "gap" can feel more like an information chasm for international students.

Anne Richardson, director of academic advising and college counseling at The American School in London, hasn't noticed a dramatic increase in the number of essays her students have had to write, but has seen an "increase in the different types of essays students need to write." This is "exacerbated" when students apply to schools outside of one applications system.

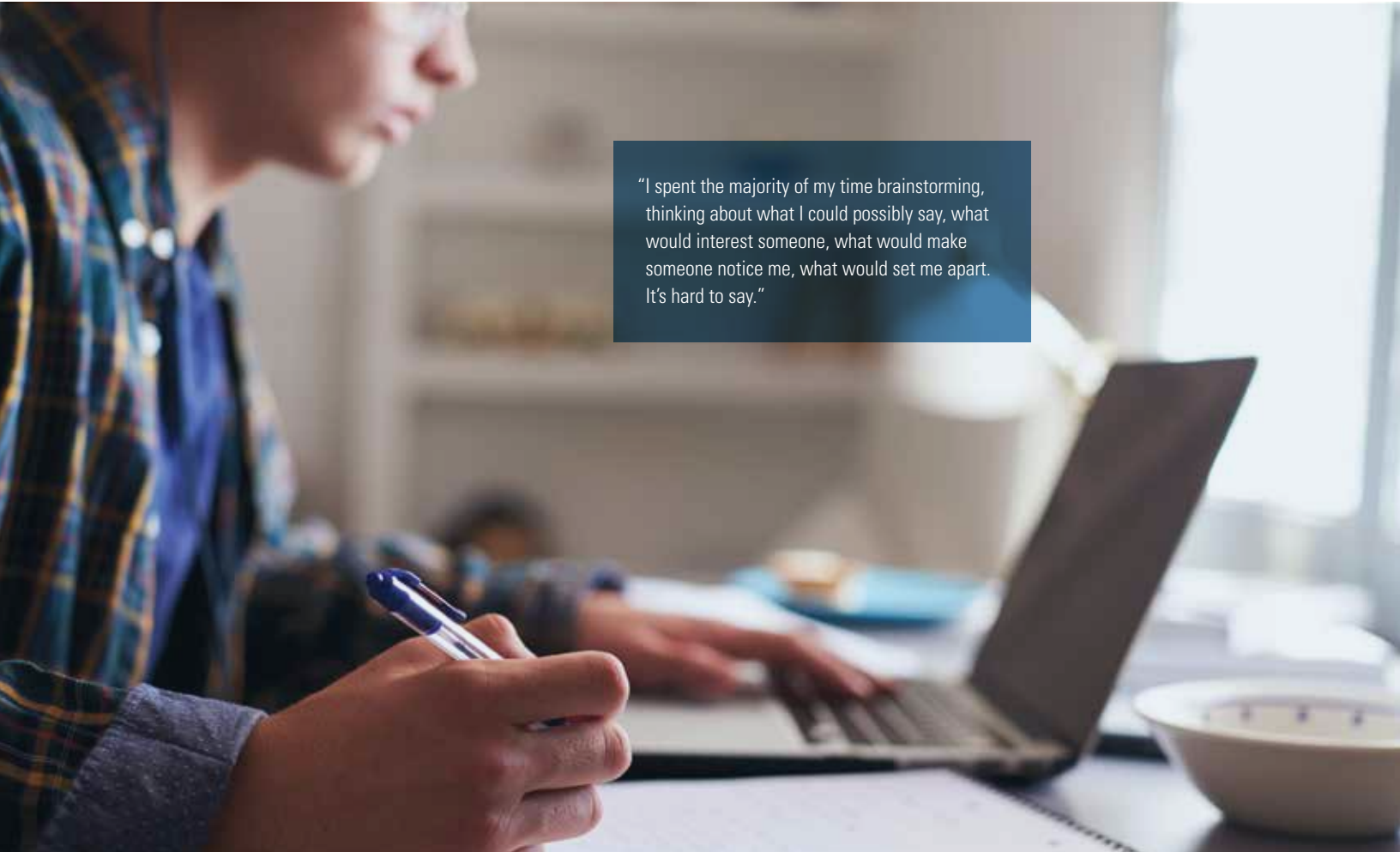
The Common Application, highly selective US schools, and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), which is used in the UK, are all very different.

UCAS asks for one personal statement that covers why students want to study a particular subject matter and how they have demonstrated this passion. US schools use essays to get to know the applicant beyond schoolwork.

"It's a completely different kind of thinking," Richardson said.

Getting to know the applicant can sometimes take a strange turn. Most colleges have their own distinct set of essay prompts, but some schools really try to make theirs unique.

- *Due to a series of clerical errors, there is exactly one typo (an extra letter, a removed letter, or an altered letter) in the name of every department at the University of Chicago. Oops! Describe your new*



"I spent the majority of my time brainstorming, thinking about what I could possibly say, what would interest someone, what would make someone notice me, what would set me apart. It's hard to say."

## REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE

With students having to write 10 or more essays for their college applications, it seems like the process has possibly spiraled out of control.

But Ethan Sawyer, also known as The College Essay Guy, sees it differently. He views it as an opportunity for students to get creative.

Sawyer has four steps for making the college application essay writing process as easy as possible for students and a way to cut down on the overall number they need to write. He calls it a “Venn diagram approach.”

**Step 1:** Students should create a list of all the colleges they plan to apply to and copy all essay prompts needed for these applications into a spreadsheet.

“Once they see all of the essays they need to write, I take them through a simple brainstorming process where they identify what I call ‘super-topics,’” he said.

**Step 2:** Students should decide what their major topics are going to be and see how they can make two, three, or even four of their necessary essays fit within those “super-topics.”

“Whenever I see multiple prompts, I see more overlapping potential. I just encourage students to play the game of, ‘ok, how can I write one thing that answers all two or three of these?’ And it works,” Sawyer said. “It’s just opening up opportunities for more creativity.”

**Step 3:** Students should write all the prompts they plan to combine at the top of each document when writing “so that as you’re writing the essay, you are keeping the other ones in mind.”

“If I put those prompts at the top of my page when I’m writing my essay and I’m brainstorming an essay that is answering both of those prompts at the same time, not only is that going to save me time, but it’s actually going to make a better essay,” he said.

**Step 4:** Write the essays, which should now be narrowed down to just three or four main essays.

“The key to this whole thing for me is the student communicating core values to the colleges,” Sawyer explained.

“No matter what the prompt is, that’s what we’re about. Oftentimes, those core values overlap in more ways than we initially think.”

*intended major. Why are you interested in it and what courses or areas of focus within it might you want to explore? Potential options include Commuter Science, Bromance Languages and Literatures, Fundamentals: Issues and Texts, Ant History...*

- You have a popular podcast. What’s the title? What’s the topic?
- Short Answer: Hashtag to describe yourself

Kass, who will be attending the University of Wisconsin in the fall, found these kinds of questions “confusing.” On one of his applications he was asked to talk about his favorite TV show or movie.

“I understand they’re trying to get to know you, but I feel like that’s not exactly what they should be looking for in deciding who to accept,” he said. “Why should I waste my time telling them about that and not something that’s actually meaningful to me?”

College application essays are also a radical departure from the types of essays students are used to writing in school.

“We learn academic essay writing, so we learn how to form an argument and things like that. But for colleges, it was more creative writing and writing about yourself, which kind of took me by surprise,” Jace said. “I thought it would be a lot more rigid and structured, but I actually found myself having to get a lot more creative.”

One of her applications simply asked her to “show yourself in writing.”

“That was really interesting, and also hard just because it was so open. It left me thinking, ‘What do they really want to know?’ But it also one of the more fun ones because I got to say what I wanted to say,” Jace said.

Schmill believes the confusion and some of the stress around the essays could be alleviated if colleges communicated why they are asking these questions. MIT includes a note and a helpful tip on their website where they list the essay questions.

“Our goal is essentially to get the students and their backgrounds, their interests, and really essentially, to try and give us a bit more context about who the student is and what their interests are, and try to get a sense about whether they would be a good fit for us or not,” he said.

Richardson and Pastor wonder if there is a way to make the process more student-focused.

“I think colleges that require additional essays are doing their best to be sensitive to being really holistic about the process and trying to find out as much as they can about each student,” Richardson said. “However, the process as a whole needs to find a way to find some balance. We need to preserve the high school experience, particularly their senior year.”

Pastor thinks it might be up to each high school to make these changes.

“I’m wondering could those things be embedded or done within the arena of schools. We know we want our students to apply to postsecondary institutions so let’s figure out which departments we can include that in. So that they would be doing coursework and getting applications done at the same time,” she said.

“If the culture at your school is that we want all of our students college- and career-ready, then you truly have to do that. It has to be embedded in the academics and not a one-time deal.”

NACAC Associate Director Melissa Clinedinst noted that a lot of work goes into what is arguably not what students are being judged on. “Although the essay can be an important part of the application process for particular colleges, students should know that grades and curricular choices carry the most weight in admission decisions. NACAC’s Admission Trends Survey shows that the college essay ranks sixth in importance overall, while grades in college prep courses has been consistently rated as the number one factor.”

**Ashley Dobson** is NACAC’s manager of communications, content and social media.